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Hundreds held in Occupy protests across nation

More than 70 are arrested in downtown L.A., and several unions call on the city to let protesters stay at a bank plaza on Bunker Hill. At a march in Manhattan, 200 are taken into custody.

By Kate Linthicum and Tina Susman, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Los Angeles and New York -- Hundreds of people were arrested across the country Thursday in a series of sometimes confrontational street demonstrations protesting efforts to break up Occupy Wall Street-inspired camps.

In New York City, where protesters were evicted from Zuccotti Park earlier this week, at least 200 people were arrested and several police officers and protesters were injured as demonstrators marched in the streets and across the Brooklyn Bridge to mark the two-month anniversary of the movement's birth.

In Los Angeles, police in riot gear squared off with protesters in the financial district and 72 people were arrested, including some who had erected tents in the middle of a busy downtown thoroughfare. Occupy L.A. protesters, who have been camped outside City Hall for nearly seven weeks, also took over a plaza outside the Bank of America Center on Bunker Hill for several hours — until police moved in and made arrests.

The incident prompted several local and national labor unions to call on the city to let the protesters stay. Maria Elena Durazo, head of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, issued a statement in support of the expanded protest, calling the bank plaza "a much more fitting target for Occupy LA than City Hall ever was or could be."

Her strong support underscored the important role unions played in several of Thursday's protests.

In New York, banner-carrying members of the Service Employees International Union led a crowd of several thousand people to Manhattan's Foley Square. Protesters then marched across the Brooklyn Bridge on a pedestrian walkway — a much more peaceful demonstration than one earlier in the day in Lower Manhattan that left several people bloodied.

Local affiliates of the same union helped organize two marches in Los Angeles. At an early morning demonstration, which snarled downtown commuter traffic, many protesters sported purple SEIU T-shirts. The main rallying point in chants and on signs was a traditional labor demand: jobs.

The role of organized labor in the Occupy movement has been debated at camps across the country, with some accusing unions of trying to co-opt the message and energy of the protest. Earlier this week, in an endorsement of President Obama's reelection campaign, the president of the SEIU used a phrase employed by the Occupy movement when she asked whether voters want leaders who will side with the top 1% of wealthiest Americans or the other 99%.

But others say that unions and Occupy have similar goals, and that labor groups have helped sustain the movement.

Occupy L.A. protester Eric Swimer said union involvement "solidifies what we are doing."

"Having a stronger presence is always good," he said.

The first protester arrested in Los Angeles on Thursday was 81-year-old Bertha Jordan, a retired nurse — and a former member of the SEIU. Unions have donated food and tents to the L.A. protest, and have issued public pleas to let protesters stay camped outside City Hall, where they have been since Oct. 1.

Also on Thursday, an Occupy L.A. protester filed a motion for a temporary restraining order to prevent police from dismantling the encampment around City Hall without first providing notice, according to the city attorney's office.

Matthew Strugar, who is on the Occupy legal committee, said the people who filed the motion are not part of the legal team and "are not authorized to represent Occupy LA."

According to Chief Deputy City Atty. William Carter, the protesters claimed in court filings that they have the right to notice because the City Council passed a resolution in support of the demonstration as long as they remained "peaceful."

Carter said attorneys from his office will appear in Los Angeles County Superior Court at 8:30 a.m. Friday to oppose the request.

Los Angeles police have said they do not plan a surprise raid on the camp like those conducted by police in other cities.

Still, some protesters in Los Angeles say the dismantling of Occupy camps in New York City and Portland, Ore., in recent days has made them wary of promises that police here will not carry out such a raid. LAPD Chief Charlie Beck said Wednesday that police are trying to negotiate a timeline to end the protest.

An estimated 1,000 protesters marched Thursday in Portland, where police fired pepper spray to disperse some who refused orders to get out of the streets and the path of light-rail trains. Thirty-four people were arrested.

Demonstrations also were held in Seattle and Dallas.